

In *Fanfare* 33:1 I gave a very favorable review to Kai Nieminen's flute and clarinet concertos on Naxos. Nieminen is a well-known guitarist, of course, but you don't really hear that influence in his music; in fact, his fluency goes way beyond anything one might associate with so comparatively parochial a tonal palate. In the previous review I etched out comparisons to Debussy (certainly) and Ibert (more specifically to that Naxos offering). And while Nieminen doesn't have the forward motion that we find in Debussy, whose melodies and harmonies tend to progress in tandem, Nieminen keeps the melody flowing while the harmonies spar with various aspects of the melodic highlights. Sometimes it drops out altogether and appears later; sometimes the harmony mimics the melody by offering snippets in a sort of call-and-response fashion, like a distant echo from a far away cave; and sometimes the harmony simply disentangles itself from any sort of block structure to become a ghost-like contrapuntal haunting of the melody. None of this probably makes sense to anyone, but listen carefully to this music and you will see what I mean.

We are given two concertos and a tone poem here, as always, at least in my limited experience with this composer, engulfed in literary associations: the Violin Concerto inspired by Cervantes of *Don Quixote*; *In Mirrors of Time* a companion piece to the Flute Concerto (with texts by Emily Dickinson inscribed in the score); and the Viola Concerto, *La Serenissima*, named after the Republic of Venice with allusions to Mann's *Death in Venice*. Heady stuff, this, but in the end nothing matters but the way these pieces sound, and they sound just fine.

The Violin Concerto is probably unique among the works of Nieminen that I have heard so far; the solo passages are legion, somewhat virtuosic, though I don't think that is the main concern here. This piece has the evocation of Sibelius in its midst, which is eminently reasonable considering Nieminen's nationality. Enter *In Mirrors of Time* and you will encounter in the last movement one of the most gorgeous pieces I have ever heard, wistful, ruminative, and melancholy in a way that we all like. It reminds me of Tobias Picker's *Old and Lost Rivers* or some reason, but the comparison is not necessarily an apt one; it's just that the emotional feeling it conjures is in the same ballpark. Again Debussy rears his spectral self, along with a more melodic Takemitsu.

With the rich scoring of the Viola Concerto, and the genius idea of accentuating the harp, we have a modern concerto that takes advantage of the viola's considerable yet often unused resources to provide not only atmosphere and warmth, but sterling technique and a leadership role in the proceedings. Violas don't get that too often, but here everything is structured around its plaintive murmurings. Of all people, Vaughan Williams shows up to this particular wake, in glorious form as if he had decided to rewrite parts of the *Tallis Fantasia*. Yes, you read me right, and the appearance of it in the final movement will indeed startle you, but upon reflection you will understand that nothing else would have worked here. It's not a literal quote, but—well, you'll see.

All of these soloists are outstanding, the sound is excellent, and the Pori players have a real grip on this music. If something by Nieminen doesn't show up on my Want List this year, it will truly have been an outstanding year to edge this guy out.

Steven E. Ritter